

**DUPLICATE**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1732

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1732.

Witness

Michael Henry,  
Srah,  
Bunehowen,  
Ballina,  
Co. Mayo.

Identity.

Battalion Commandant, 6th Battalion,  
North Mayo Brigade.

Subject.

Srah Company, Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Mayo.

1917 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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No. W.S. 1732

STATEMENT BY MICHAEL HENRY,  
*Bunnahaven, Ballina,*  
Srah, ~~Moncastle~~, County Mayo.

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I was born in the year '98 in the townland of Srah, parish ~~Kilconnor~~ <sup>Kilconnor</sup> of ~~Kilconnor~~, County of Mayo. I am the eldest of twelve, eight boys and four girls. My parents were landless. My father worked for a seed merchant in Glasgow. I saw very little of him except once a year, when he came to take potato workers away. He was a good father, and we were never short of the necessaries of life.

He belonged to a good old Fenian stock. His father and uncles took part - and a very active part - in the land war. His uncle Anthony was in charge of the then movement in the barony of Ennis. He was 'on the run' following the shooting of a landlord, Victor Shaen Carter, and one Thomas Barrett, who stated coming from a fair, that he could lay his hand on the man who shot Carter. Eventually he was captured, but succeeded in escaping from custody. Some time later he was re-captured and sentenced to one year's imprisonment. He was discharged from Omagh jail, and went to America where he died. My father bought a holding of land in Srah: the assignment required the landlord's consent. This was refused with the comment "I saw the day when I had to go on my knees before that name".

My mother's maiden name was Heffron. Her father was a stonemason and also owned a little farm.

I went to school at the age of four. I was rated a good student with more than the ordinary intelligence. The school was then known as the "National" school. The principal was very good at

Mathematics, but his national outlook was not so good. My mother taught me at night, by the big turf fire. She had a lovely voice, and sang of Emmet, Dwyer, Mitchell and Rossa. As I grew older she got me to read and recite "Speeches from the Dock". It was she who instilled into my memory a deep love of country. Finally I reached eight standard, and later was detailed to teach junior classes.

I remember a particular incident :- I was giving a lecture to the class on the landing of the Normans. Naturally I was upholding the Irish. The principal appeared, corrected me, and said the Irish were savages before the landing. I felt <sup>so</sup> humiliated not for myself, but for the Irish, that I packed up, left school and never returned. This must have been 1915, and within a year I made myself a dummy rifle, and hereafter I became engaged in the noble trade of arms. The priests were then, as was later proved, some good and some not so good - from the national standpoint.

A small Company of Volunteers was formed in Belmullet in late 1914 or early 1915 and were known as Redmond Volunteers. Heretofore there was no national organisation. This Company ceased to exist after the formation of a Company of Irish Volunteers in Srah in October, 1916. At the same time and in the same townland a Sinn Féin Cumann was formed. Training personnel were unprocurable and we had to have recourse to British Training Manuals. Owing to the geographical position of the area, we were very much out of touch. Whatever encouragement we got was from Michael Kilroy, Newport, although our natural Headquarters should be Ballina. We continued training and organising other Companies and the results achieved were good.

We continued Close Order Drill during 1917. Firearms were scarce, there being some shot-guns augmented by dummy guns for

musketry purposes. Towards the end of the year, I arranged with a blacksmith, one Charles Cawley, to forge pikes, and we had hundreds of these shafted. The first world war was raging during this time. Our area suffered from migration, but the threat of compulsory service across the water sent the majority of the young men home, to be absorbed into our ranks. A German submarine made contact with some fishermen off the coast. A fuelling base was established. Our organisation had nothing whatever to do with this. It appears one Gallagher, a sailor from Belmullet, found his way into the German service, and it was through him contact was made with two brothers (Walsh) pale of Gallagher. Petrol was conveyed some twenty-five miles to the townland of Carrateigue, and through this contact, German arms of some description were landed. This was virgin country, as we had not as yet penetrated, but as a result of information received I interviewed one Rowan, of Stonefields, Carrateigue. He didn't deny or confirm anything. I arranged a further meeting, but he never turned up. I'm confident that some arms and ammunition were landed, as years later, while working as foreman in the same district, on road construction and demolishing an old house for road, I found some rifle bullets in walls; the bullets were of foreign origin. Furthermore I was presented with a German parrabellum by the local teacher - Master Doherty (deceased). This weapon was later, while in the custody of another man, captured by the then Free State army.

From information collected at the time, I went to considerable inconvenience to obtain the arms :- One Poye representing Ballycastle Volunteers, whatever hope, or contact made, journeyed to a public-house

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*J. Moloney*

Name: (J. Moloney.)

Grade: Col.

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Date: 7 March 2003.

in Pullathomas within some four miles from Carrateiguo, and as a result of loose talk, the R.I.C. of Rosspport took possession of the stuff within twenty-four hours. The Walshs, Petrol suppliers, fled secretly to Manchester, England. They died within the same week and are buried in the same Churchyard as Allen, Larkin and O'Brien.

The threat of Conscription in 1918 intensified training.

Field exercises were introduced, disc practise, Company drill, "extend and <sup>close</sup> chase", also the art of taking cover. This was done secretly on moonlight nights and training personnel were sent to train and organise other Companies. The Sinn Féin organisation grew side by side. Special services were organised in the Srah Company in 1919, such as Signalling and First Aid. There was then only one Brigade in Mayo, under Joseph McBride, and as yet we had no assistance from outside except a visit to my house of Dick Walsh, and Tom Derrig (deceased), Westport.

(A unit of Fianna Fáireann was formed in 1919.)

I know they met the Company officers and gave a lecture on morale. I can't remember if they met, or reviewed the Company on parade, but I understood they were on a secret tour of organisation. We built Company dumps that year, although we had only a small number of practically obsolete shotguns. Some of us were getting impatient for arms, and, following a Company Staff meeting it was decided that I go to Scotland and procure some. There was no fund, but I was hoping my father would help us out. Through him I contacted two men in the Edinburgh area, one Bonner of South Queensferry, and the other Hyland, off Broxburn. I collected four revolvers, some gelignite and detonators. Bonner worked in mines, and as far as I know Hyland was  
I forget what they cost, but I do know that my father paid for them.

I packed my stuff into a good second-hand suit-case, with the exception of the detonators, which I carried in my waistcoat pockets. (I didn't know as much of the danger of these then as I did know in later years) and headed for Srah by Belfast. I arrived in Belfast in the early morning. I was accosted by a policeman at the dock. He asked me how far I was going. I said Enniskillen. "You wouldn't be going to Belmullet?" says he. "Not tonight" says I, sort of casual. My hair stood on end, but he passed on. He must have known me, but didn't connect me with carrying contraband.

In due course I arrived at my destination. Later I cycled to Newport and stayed with Michael Kilroy. I brought back some .48 bullets in the bicycle frame.

Sinn Fein Courts were established I think early in 1920.

Night patrols of the R.I.C. began. We also patrolled and established "listening posts." We built a bigger dump to house our war material. Michael Kilroy sent on a mould for making gun pellets. We stole all the lead we could get hands on and had it converted. I was summoned to the County meeting in the Asylum grounds in Castlebar, having been previously appointed Battalion O/C. by the Company O/Cs of the existing thirteen Companies in the barony. Four Brigades were formed in Castlebar, and Tom Ruane, Ballina, became my Brigade O/C. Communications route was then established with Ballina and training and intelligence reports furnished regularly. Later I attended a Brigade meeting in Ballina. A G.H.Q. representative <sup>and</sup> Tom Derrig was present. I was surprised to learn that some of the Battalions were only at the "Close Order" stage. I asked for instructions on "Attack and Defence". The meeting couldn't credit that we had reached that stage. On being questioned, I satisfied the G.H.Q. representative. Thomas Derrig confirmed this,

as he taught Technical School at Belmullet and visited our parades.

We had a grand organisation about this time and we raided civilian houses, who held firearms on certificates. We burned a police car outside the barracks at Geesala. We raided two houses next the barracks one night for guns. There were six of us in the party. Admittance was refused and the doors had to be battered in. At a distance of about ten paces, one Pat Reilly and I kept the barrack doors covered. We secured two good shotguns and a good quantity of cartridges. I was surprised that the police didn't venture out, since the battering of the doors could be plainly heard. It was a five man station and four of them were out on patrol. A scout from the Geesala Company was sent to Srah earlier to warn us, but he never made contact, as the night was very dark and stormy. We were a cycling party and we travelled to and from in "extended order" armed with four revolvers and two shotguns. On returning our rear man (Martin Moran) due, I believe, to his chain coming off, lost contact. The police, without our knowledge, came in a branch road and Moran was captured, armed and masked. As he didn't turn up at the rendezvous, we sought him on foot, doubling back on the green, but the dawn was breaking and we had some four miles to return home. Moran got penal servitude.

Civil administration in the Battalion area was conducted by Sinn Fein and the Volunteers policed the district. On one occasion two Volunteer police were arrested and sent to Cranmore Prison, Sligo. Court summonses and Civil Bills were served by Volunteers. A Court with the status of a Circuit Court today, was held in the Workhouse, Belmullet. Our Brigade O/C. was a member of that Court. During proceedings the R.I.C. armed with rifles raided, and arrested Court personnel. I asked permission of Brigade O/C to disarm R.I.C., but was refused on the grounds that such an action would



justify firing on future Courts. Two lorries of Tommies came from Castlebar, including a machine-gun section. One Paddy Keane, John Heston and I, raised the swing bridge at Belmullet after the lorries crossed, with a view to their isolation. The bridge separated the town from the Workhouse. The parish priest, later Canon Hegarty, came forward and compelled us leave. I suppose our act was fool-hardy, but we were desperate for arms. The members of the Court were released after a few days, the late P.J. Rutledge among them. He was a practising solicitor then. This led to his re-arrest afterwards, as he refused to apologise for his presence there.

The Bangor-Erris R.I.C. barracks was earmarked for attack. The garrison comprised five men. This must have been the time outposts were called in to the larger stations. It was thought we might gain admittance by a ruse, but later this was ruled out, and we decided to attack. Gun cartridges were re-loaded and I prepared a mine. I took three picked men from the Srah Company armed with revolvers. We contacted members of the Bangor-Erris Company and dug them into positions at night. The mine was placed in position, and I called on the post to surrender. A woman's voice called, and said the place was evacuated earlier that night. Although the barracks was supposed to be kept under observation, the police slid out, and, according to information received the following day, we missed each other by about one hundred yards, at a road junction. They were a cycling party too, and carried rifles "on the sling". We consigned the place to flames, having first removed the personal belongings of the Sergeant's wife and her two sons (lads about 16 or 17). We got no stores. Considerable police activity followed, and a member of the Bangor Company was captured (P. Shevlane). Although masked on that night, it appears it was he who was detailed to find alternate shelter for the occupants of the barracks, and the woman recognised his voice..

We got five years penal servitude.

Let me say here that we never got any encouragement from the Brigade. On the contrary I am satisfied that any armed action of ours was not approved on the plea that once we attacked, we should be sufficiently armed to continue the fight. Acting on orders, we raised a fund for arms. As far as I remember the amount collected in the Battalion was £288.10.0.

An R.I.C. man, a stranger to the district, wearing civilian clothes, was killed in Belmullet on 15th June, 1920. Believed to be a detective, he was killed by the I.R.A.. Somehow I never regarded this as an act of war. We transferred our war material to a new dugout. There were a number of us "on the run". We must have the worst fighting ground in Ireland, flat country, dominated by two hills, no cover, not a solitary bush. We slept mostly in dugouts. Members of the Srah Company were fired on one night returning from a training centre. Later two men were rounded-up, one an ex-British soldier, a native of the locality, and the other a member of the ascendancy gang. There were two revolvers found on their person. They were taken to a disused house, courtmartialled and ordered to leave the country for four years. Some time later when returning home one night my brother David and I (returning for a change of clothing) walked into a piquett. The piquet comprised one Head Constable, two Sergeants and six Police. We were handcuffed, kicked about the place for some time, and rifle butts were freely used. We were taken to the house where a thorough search was made. The £288.10.0. Battalion fund was taken. My mother stated it was her property, and one Sergeant Garvey of Geesala stated that he was satisfied that she kept a certain amount of money, and as no list accompanied it, they handed it back.

A few nights later, the Battalion Vice O/C., Michael McAndrew (deceased) and Peter O'Malley, Battalion I.O., took possession of the money, and had it transferred to Brigade Headquarters. The Battalion never received any arms in return. From information received from the late Tom Derrig, in Galway gaol, one Eamon Cannon, a native of West Mayo, detailed to travel to Dublin with the North Mayo Brigade fund, if alive he should be able to state what happened, as he was the Brigade representative. David and I, together with two other Volunteers apprehended, were marched to Belmullet, a distance of six miles. We were later taken by escort to Castlebar gaol. Some days later we travelled with a convoy of thirteen lorries to Galway. The practise at the time was to hand prisoners over to the Tans at Eglinton Street barracks, Galway, where such prisoners were obliged to make peculiar twists and turns in the backyard, and handed over in good shape to the Gaol Governor.

Our ex-Tommy swag back home, instead of leaving the country, turned King's evidence. Depositions were taken in the gaol by one Captain Sherry, British Army. On refusing to remove our head-dress, the escort obliged by removing them with bayonets. The ex-Tommy was present and perjured himself, since the Volunteers, who apprehended and courtmartialled him, were masked. Later we had a Field General Courtmartial at Renmore Barracks and were sentenced to fourteen years commuted to four.

At that time prisoners at Renmore for trial were kept there until dark, and some were shot on the way back to gaol - "trying to escape", moryah!

Our Tan escort were not, I assure you thirsty, and one gent split my eyebrow with a revolver even before we left Renmore.

I felt sure that we would be shot on the way back to the gaol, as I heard one of the Belmullet R.I.C. tell the Tans, "Shoot the bastards". This was said in the distance, and was not meant for our ears. I recollect clearly that I wasn't afraid, but I was worried about my young brother, as he wasn't 17 years.

There was friction between the Tommys and Tans in Galway at that time. As we were about to depart for the gaol, a fresh prisoner arrived with an escort of Tommys. We shared the same truck and, strange to say, we were not mal-treated. The Sergeant of the new escort inquired about my eye; the blood was then dripping down my face. I told him, also the conversation I overheard. He brandished his rifle and said openly that if the Tans further interfered he'd shoot.

Christmas was spent in Galway gaol. It must have been the filthiest gaol in the world. The blankets were actually alive with vermin. I slept on the floor and yet my clothing became affected. I complained to the warder, but he only smiled. First chance I got, I kicked them on to the landing and banged my door. The blankets were changed, but I still had company. January 1921, we were transferred to the basement in Mountjoy. Through the little light of my window I used to watch the Tans train blood-hounds outside. Long term prisoners from all over the country were herded into Mountjoy awaiting deportation.

On a Friday night the Civil Authorities, during curfew, handed us over to a Tan escort in the 'Joy grounds. Somehow our escorts were always under the influence of drink. We were lined up in double line. They were looking for Joe Murphy of Cork. He was

doing a life sentence, convicted on a charge of throwing a grenade, which killed one Pte. Squibbs of the British Army. Since our party refused to give names Joe couldn't be found. Rifle and revolver butts were freely used. We were handcuffed and kicked into trucks. Whether it was intentional or otherwise I was drawn behind a crossley until the handcuff snapped when I was re-kicked on to the truck. My shoes and pants were pulled to shreds and I am even yet subject to pains in the shoulder. On arrival at the North Wall, "hell was let loose", rifle and revolver butts, kicks, anything and everything - "Ye bastards ye will never see Ireland again". We were blasted into the deck of a ship; somebody called it a mine-sweeper, and bundled down into its hold. An infantry unit took us over. Two soldiers with fixed bayonets stood at the "poop". We were kept in irons all along. A warder from Mountjoy held the keys, and we sailed away from dear old Ireland.

Sea-sickness set in during the night; the atmosphere was terrible, little or no ventilation, and there wasn't space to turn. We weren't told our destination. To get to the lavatory, you had to go on deck. This meant you had to be unlocked by the warder, walk upstairs, where one of the two soldiers took over. This little soldier kept you on the "double" with the point of the bayonet until you got back.

Gaol rations were served at gaol-hours, but it was impossible to eat, as the scent from the vomit on the floor was terrible.

Next day the escort officer came partly downstairs and announced that we were to come on deck in sections, for scrubbing exercise; in other words - to scrub the decks. He met with a prompt refusal. He brandished a revolver and threatened to enforce his order by sending down the guard. Let me tell you, "irons, or no irons", that guard

would be pulled to pieces. The guard never arrived. It must have been in the afternoon of the third day that we were ordered on deck, when land was sighted on the left flank. We gradually drew near, when a great building could be sighted, at a high altitude. We guessed that this was to be our new home, Portland.

The Chief Warden, together with forty other warders, received us at the quay. We were marched, I should say about one and a half miles up a steep hill towards the gaol. Some of the prisoners, due no doubt to abuse, hunger, had to have attention <sup>on</sup> the way. The military guard accompanied us also.

We were given baths, re-clad, and put into separate cells on arrival.

We were an organised body before leaving Dublin and an organised body we remained, despite every effort of the enemy to break us. Before leaving Mountjoy our Commandant, Jerry Barry, Dublin, got a message to Headquarters asking what our attitude if deported, should be. The reply was, "Accept convict treatment as Robert Barton". It was Barton's wish that we shouldn't strike. He made this known I believe through the chaplain.

Now Barton and his comrades had staged a break-up strike, and were actually undergoing thirty days punishment when we arrived there. Our Commandant learned of this during the next week and there was a council of war. I omitted to state that we were organised into working parties by the prison authorities. I belonged to the "Cleaners Party". I remember whispering to a comrade, one Charlie Sommers, Dublin, that we should strike. His reply was "It is a matter for the Commandant". The warden must have overheard for I was marched off to another part of the prison, and put into

solitary confinement where I went on hunger-strike, interviewed by the Prison M.O. the following day. He asked me what class of a school I attended and mentioned the state of unrest in Ireland. Why we interfered with the guardians of the law "the police". "If you were in France" he said "and misbehaved, a Gendarme would strike off your hand with a sword". I saw at once that he was completely ignorant of the true state of affairs. The English press is a powerful weapon of false propaganda. I told him the true story. It took some time to convince him that the police actually carried arms. I gave him reports of what I saw myself. He promised to intercede for my return if I came off hunger-strike. I gave no promise. The next day I was taken back to my party. I don't know how this happened, unless they were afraid all prisoners would strike. The Connaught Rangers (mutineers) were in Portland also.

We were allowed two letters in four months if our conduct was good. I remember writing my first letter. You were given the official notepaper and envelope. The first page told you what to say, and not to say. Having written mine, I took up a book, a reading book, just issued. I remember it was all in praise of the British Empire. The first page finished with "That grand old Empire on which the sun never sets." I wrote underneath "And where slavery never dies". This was discovered on book-changing day. I was taken away to the "tea-gardens" punishment cells and given three days bread and water. Sometime later, in July I believe, we were transferred to Dartmoor. Chained in sixes we boarded one of his Majesty's "ships of the line" to Plymouth and thence by rail to Dartmoor. Before leaving Portland, the chaplain one Sunday in Church, gave us to understand that negotiations were taking place between both Governments. We were all praying and hoping that there be no compromise. We now know the uncertainty of stepping stones. Contrary to prison regulations,

we sang and danced on his Majesty's ship. A marine with fixed bayonet was detailed to stop us, but we wouldn't be stopped.

We got ten days punishment after reaching our destination. While in Dartmoor we made such noise, that the good citizens of Princetown petitioned the Government to send on a detachment of soldiers, which it did. Our communication line remained intact, "tapping the pipes" - morse. Taidgh Crowley, Limerick, became our O/C in Dartmoor. I was in charge of the Connaught contingent.

We were discharged in February 1922. Fr. Dom Arnold, O.S.B. travelled with us to Plymouth, where we were presented with the Tricolour by the Self Determination League. The streets were deserted while we marched through. The Flag was carried by 'Big' Roache, Wexford. An old Irishwomen came forward and kissed the Flag, with the remark, "God bless our Irish boys". We were delighted coming home, but we didn't come for long. That body of men, as brave and loyal as Ireland produced, shot each other down during the next year. It would be better had they died in lonely Dartmoor.

SIGNED: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

WITNESS: \_\_\_\_\_

